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Shortened title: "Nobody will thank me for this"

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this paper contains no material previously published by the author or any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. It has not been submitted simultaneously for publication elsewhere.

“Nobody will thank me for this”: Championing the ERA

Abstract:

In recent years there has been a shift within Australian Universities to a corporate model of management rather than the collegial approach of the past. Concomitantly, Federal government funding mechanisms have required greater accountability for its financial investment in the sector’s research activities. In turn, the daily life of an Australian scholar has undergone a significant transformation. In this current audit culture, academic staff are required to deal with the conflicting demands of onerous teaching commitments, emphasis on increased research production and the devolving of ever burgeoning administration to their own desktops.

While University research communities were negotiating the requirements for the 2009-10 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment, academic life proved particularly challenging for scholars whose work spans both traditional and non-traditional forms of research publication. This paper considers the implications of ERA for staff working in non-traditional research areas and the various negotiations they had to make between the requirements established by ERA and university administration and their own research inclinations. In particular it focuses on the activities of the ‘champions’, those assigned the task of collecting and collating the information, the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to deal with often conflicting impulses; on one hand the need to comply with reporting requirements and on the other, the reticence of their colleagues as well as their own misgivings. In so doing this paper reflects upon the tensions encompassing contemporary scholarly affairs.

Key words:

Research assessment

Audit culture

Academic identity

Contemporary scholarly life

Like the true Foucauldian subject that I am, I confess. For my sins I was an ERA champion. During 2009 and the first semester of 2010, I, along with a valiant band of valued colleagues, consorted with the dark side to assist in the collation and administration of our University's research quantum data for firstly the trial and then the implementation of the Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) assessment. As scholars who come from the Humanities and Creative Arts disciplines we faced conflicting impulses; on one hand the need to comply with reporting requirements of our University and on the other, the reticence of our colleagues as well as our own misgivings. While many academics across the country found themselves in similar situations and circumstances, this paper explores those tensions through a personal reflection upon the roles of the champions in our engagement with and responses to the ERA. After a brief introduction regarding contemporary university culture, including an overview of the ERA, I will consider more closely the implications of research assessment exercises for academic staff, in particular for those of us who have been co-opted by the university to undertake a variety of tasks involved in auditing research activity. I highlight the often conflicting compulsions encountered by scholars in the multiplicity of roles they perform from

my own perspective as a researcher colleague and an audit champion. In so doing I reveal the complex affairs of contemporary scholarly life.

In the past decade there has been a noticeable change in the culture of Australian Universities and the way scholars engage in academic life. Bennett (2010), Giroux (2009), Redden (2008) and Thornton (2008) amongst others have noted that there has been a broader shift within contemporary universities to a corporate model of governance where traditional forms of academic activities have been disciplined at all levels of endeavour as part of a continuous cycle of auditing. As Thornton suggests ‘The performative imperative underpinning auditing schemes (like the RQF) requires academics to prove constantly that they are productive and worthwhile university citizens. If they once prided themselves on being good teachers – too bad - they must now reinvent themselves or be declared redundant’ (Thornton, 2008:7).

Within Australian higher education, the corporatized university has produced, according to Redden, ‘greater managerial intervention on what academics do with their time’ as ‘academic activities are becoming increasingly measured for their instrumental value to the ‘knowledge economy’. Thus ‘corporatisation also increasingly opens up academic practice to managerial calculations of value for money of operations. Activities and outputs are placed under close scrutiny, and the allocation of resources follows in line. In matters of research, the old preparedness to gift time to one’s employer has been harnessed and transformed into generalised requirements for workers to do more, and along certain lines, in order to win resources continually’ (Redden, 2008: n.p.). In addition, as universities respond to the government’s requirements in order to be considered high ranking in the research league tables, ‘research

assessment becomes the driver of teaching policies, including course offerings and class sizes, as well as institutional and individual choices regarding topic, type of research and publication destination” (Thornton, 2008:7). As a result as Thornton notes ‘auditing may exercise a destructive effect on collegiality’(Thornton, 2008:7).

Similarly, Sousa, de Nijs and Hendriks (2010) argue that the international trend to appraise research performance has seen a shift towards greater managerialism within universities. As well as noting the adverse effects of auditing research performance on ‘traditional professional values of autonomy, collegialism and professionalism that academics embrace’ (Sousa et al, 2010:1441), they contend that there is a resultant increase pressure upon researchers to take on the role of managers. Their study highlights the complex set of negotiations and coping strategies enacted by research managers who find themselves caught between the imperatives of an audit culture, the need to provide leadership and direction to their disciplinary cohort of researchers, and their own desires for academic freedom and professionalism. Evoking the term ‘boundary management’, Sousa, de Nijs and Hendriks reveal how some research managers operate strategically by maintaining ‘context-specific identities in their routine practices at work’ (Sousa et al, 2010:1454). As the ensuing discussion will show, the practice of boundary management enabled the champions to sustain their own sense of integrity amidst the challenges they faced during the ERA process.

Acknowledging the preponderance of an audit culture that has affected contemporary academia, my interest lies with its recent manifestation under the 2009-10 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment. In line with international trends in evaluating research

performance, such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom and the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand, the Australian Government through the auspices of the Australian Research Council (ARC) aimed to evaluate the quality of research undertaken in Australian universities. Derived from an earlier model, the Research Quality Framework (RQF), the ERA as an auditing mechanism utilized a number of metrics including the ranking of journal articles, citation analysis and peer review to assess the quality of research undertaken in the assessment period. In order to identify and classify research, the ARC employed the system of Field of Research (FoR) codes gleaned from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' guide, the *Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification* in which types of research are codified according to a numerical system, from a two digit code to signify a broad field, to a four digit closer grouping, and finally a specific type indicated by six digits. So for example in my research field, FoR 19 stands for Studies in Creative Arts and Writing, 1905 for Visual Arts and Crafts, and 190502 for Fine Arts. For ERA 2010, these FoRs, (1,238 of them in total) were then grouped into eight clusters that were considered related activities ranging from science and engineering, through to health sciences and humanities. Though not an immediate concern for this paper, the problems associated with this method of classification, have been discussed recently by authors such as Bennett, Genoni and Haddow (2011) and Young, Peetz and Marais (2011). Similarly, arising from feedback on the 2010 audit, the ARC have taken on board some of the issues raised by academics over both the clustering of research and the disadvantages to interdisciplinary activities by revising some of the auditing mechanisms for ERA 2012. The revisions are being implemented at the time of amending this paper for publication so it remains to be seen whether such changes will in fact assuage academics' concerns.

Following an initial trial of data collation and analysis protocols for two clusters, Physical and Chemical Engineering (PCE) and Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) in 2009, the full scale program, covering the whole University sector, was undertaken in 2010. For universities across the country, the ERA marked a shift not only in future funding mechanisms for their activities, but also in the way their administrators acknowledged, recorded, collated and reported on, the research undertaken by their staff. Crucially for the ‘champions’, those staff members charged with engaging their colleagues in the audit, ERA presented challenges that required them to renegotiate their own understandings of their roles in University life and their identities as contemporary scholars.

The 2009 trial provided a useful insight into an appropriate administrative structure with which my University’s Office of Research and Development (ORD) could undertake the full assessment. The key activities of data collation for the University’s final ERA submission centred in that Office around a small administrative team which was headed up by an exceptional female academic administrator who provided intelligent, efficient and highly supportive leadership throughout both the trial and the full assessment. In a University where the organisational structures of Faculties and Schools did not fall into disciplinary groupings under specific Field of Research codes, it was essential that the ERA team had reliable and valid information about two interconnecting components, eligible staff and their research publications. Thus the role of the champions was a critical component in both the collection of data and the dissemination of information between administrators and academic staff. In each organizational unit, usually a Faculty grouping, both academic and general staff were co-opted into the

administration of ERA and tasked to take various responsibilities. While the general staff champions were mainly responsible for keying in data and keeping track of spreadsheets, the academic cohort served two main functions; first to ensure that within their organizational unit not only all eligible staff and their research publications were included in the assessment, but also that each person and each publication was assigned up to three FoR codes; and second to take responsibility for a particular two digit FoR disciplinary field, identifying the works destined for peer review, and writing the background statement which contextualized the University's research strengths in that field.

On paper this appeared a relatively simple exercise in data collection and collation, something easily achieved via spreadsheets and cross referencing. However, champions working within the Humanities and Creative Arts cluster faced challenges not initially perceived by our research office administrative managers. Whereas information about traditional research publications such as book chapters, journal articles and published conference proceedings mostly had been captured by the University's existing mechanisms, SCRIPT (the on line database for staff to report on their own research publications) and the internal rewards scheme, the Research Performance Index (RPI), the majority of non-traditional outputs such as creative works, performances and curatorial practices had not. This absence from the archive, due in part to the University's strict adherence to Federal Government reporting mechanisms in the past, (the DETYA, DEST, etc prescriptive research quantum indices) had a major impact on our ability to carry out the required tasks. We faced two crucial hurdles. In the first instance there was the lack of valid and verifiable information readily at hand, but more importantly, within our disciplines there existed a deep seated resentment and reticence by many colleagues. This was particularly

the case in my own disciplinary FoR code 19, Studies in Creative Arts and Writing where a large percentage of staff were engaged in a range of non-traditional research activities, including amongst others: painting, sculpture, digital arts, photography, film making, theatrical performances, as well as novel and poetry writing. Many of these staff members had initially been employed by the University because of their professional standing and expertise within their respective fields of creative production and now they felt forced to explain and justify their credibility as academics. And many were not happy.

Such reactions to the ERA are understandable. The perceived exclusion from the University's research community had been exacerbated not only by inadmissible RPI claims in the past, but also by numerous policy documents pertaining to the University research agendas and strategic direction that more closely align with the fields of science and engineering. Not only did many scholars in non-traditional areas feel left out of the conversation but also consider their research activities are marginalized, misunderstood and devalued. Thus, when seeking information, the champions were confronted by responses from colleagues that ranged from openly hostile to benign cynicism; for example, typical comments included: 'Why should I provide the University with this information when it's done nothing to support my research?' 'Yeah, so what, filling in this form isn't going to change anything is it?'

While a central problem for quite a few staff was the difficulty in trying to account for five years of research activities that occurred sometime in the past, especially when the practice of maintaining records and relevant documentation has not been a standard requirement, a key stumbling block proved to be the research statement that had to accompany every non-traditional

publication. Limited to 250 words, each statement had to provide information about the type of research undertaken, detailing the background context, its contribution to new knowledge and its significance. In their study of the impact of the ERA on creative writing, Krauth, Webb and Brien (2010) highlight the difficulties that research statements pose especially in regard to trying to account for research significance and evidence of excellence. This was particularly a sticking point for staff whose research is based in visual rather than verbal forms of articulation. For example, for one colleague, a high profile nationally regarded painter who firmly believed his ‘work speaks for itself’, such a statement was not only an anathema but yet further indication of the University’s complete lack of understanding of research in the visual arts. His response was indicative of another aspect with which the champions had to contend; the confusion over who was enforcing these requirements and for what purpose.

These misapprehensions were palpable during a workshop for staff in the Faculty of Humanities organized by the champions at the time of the trial. Conceived as an effective way of assisting with the writing of research statements, the two hour workshop was designed as an opportunity for staff to work with more savvy colleagues on articulating the vagaries of the contribution and significance of their own research work. However within the first part of the program, while outlining the specificities of ERA, it was evident that the majority of staff attending had little or no idea about what sort of research was eligible, nor the type of information required to verify it. Moreover there was considerable misunderstanding about the University’s own reporting mechanisms such as the RPI and SCRIPT. It became apparent there was little point in focusing on research statements when our colleagues distrusted and felt disenfranchised from the whole process. Why should they go to the trouble of sourcing

information and providing evidence if in the first instance they didn't feel valued by the University? Instead of developing prowess in writing statements, the workshop resolved into an 'ERA myth busters seminar' with the champions acting as mediators and interpreters of policy directions.

The workshop is a useful example for highlighting the complex of roles and responsibilities that the champions enacted and how these impacted on our own identities as scholars. In the shifting dynamics of workshop discussions, we held various positions; as voices of authority, as mouth pieces for the auditors, as compatriots in the war against University executive management, and as colleagues trying to make the best of yet another imposition on working life. We felt caught between conflicting allegiances within the audit mechanisms. On one hand we recognised the importance to the University of collecting valid data as well as realizing that to have a good showing from non-traditional research areas would increase our chances of contributing to a change in perceptions about our worth to the University's research agenda in the future. And on the other hand, we were members of that same cohort who had to rummage through files under our beds to find appropriate evidence of previously unaccounted for research activities and give up precious hours of the little research time available to us to deal with 'administrivia'.

My own responses are indicative of these conflicting positions. As one of the champions involved in regular briefing sessions with the Office of Research and Development, I understood the administrative imperatives, how important it was to the University to have good results in the league tables and the implications for faculties, schools and potentially individual staff members

if they scored badly. As a member of the Faculty of Humanities, I was aware of the ongoing perceptions within its own research community that we were poor cousins (at best) and pariahs (at worst) within the University's research culture. As a scholar working in the visual arts, I had firsthand experience of my research work being excluded from previous RPI rounds and concomitantly feeling the University didn't value my scholarship. And like my colleagues in the School of Design and Art, I now had to justify the significance and innovation of various catalogue essays and curatorial projects that I had undertaken some five years previously.

Certainly these conflicting personas were evident in the day to day interactions throughout the ERA audit. Initially, and somewhat naively, I think we all had the impression that although it was a big job it could be undertaken reasonably efficiently. However, we soon realised that no amount of email was going to provide the information we needed. It would take the personal approach, sitting with each staff member individually, identifying valid research and then allocating FoR codes to both them and their publications. Whereas as some colleagues were appreciative – or should I say compliant – others were either non-plussed (couldn't give a fig would be more accurate) or quite obstinate, especially when it came to the crucial moment of assigning that all important field of research code, for example as one staff member argued: 'My work has nothing to do with Philosophy' (2203). 'I'm involved in women's screen arts' (Feminist Theory 220306, Cinema Studies 190201). I admit there were times within the audit when I could recite FoRs down to the 6 digit level. Yes, I had it bad, though no different from my champion companions judging by the email traffic in the height of the audit nightmare when messages were flurrying at one o'clock in the morning.

It was also in these individual meetings with colleagues that we experienced moments when we felt like we were somehow traitors to the cause and had sold out to the audit culture. These feelings were common when discussing ERA requirements with colleagues who worked in non-traditional research areas. As champions we understood the audit protocols and the specific information required to verify research activity, whereas many of our colleagues did not. The difficulty lay in trying to explain that while the researcher may have considered a specific piece of creative production a pivotal work in their oeuvre, we required more than their opinion to justify it, that we needed evidence of its quality and significance such as the gallery in which the art work was exhibited, the publishing house that promulgated the anthology of poems, and so forth, indicators that others had recognized it as a major contribution to knowledge. In a discussion of his own response to the ERA audit, Ron Elliot (2011) has highlighted the incongruities involved in trying to explain the originality and significance of research activity in the areas of script writing and film making. He notes ‘not only are creatives being called on to go through extra stages of explication and communication, but we must also deny the value of creative process itself and only highlight the traditional research components’(Elliot, 2011:108). And like him I wonder ‘why should an esteemed colleague have to go through enormous gymnastics to demonstrate that her fifth novel is not just another one about old ladies in love, when another colleague is lauded for his 50th article on Shakespeare without the same demand to explain’ (107). As Krauth, Webb and Brien (2010) suggest, such statements present a new form of genre in creative writing with which scholars in non-traditional research fields now have to contend and become adept in.

In discussing the problems faced by teacher-writers within academia, Jeri Kroll coins the term ‘vampire academy’ (Kroll, 2006). Kroll notes the complex set of identities, the volume of tasks and related increasing pressures that exist ‘due to the bureaucratic pressure partly engendered by government audits of the universities’ (Kroll, 2006:3). As champions our sense of self worth was enmeshed in multiple identities. As part of the administration it involved successfully compiling copious quantities of disparate bits of research, collating them into some sensible composite and then writing a narrative to explain its significance and merit, all within a very tight time frame. As colleagues within the Faculty, it entailed ensuring the diversity and richness of our research was captured and elucidated in some understandable form to our University managers and auditors. As individual scholars, it was the ultimate frustration at having to devote all our energies to an audit that we not only didn’t want but also considered flawed, as well as forego any thoughts about making a significant contribution to knowledge through our own research activities. The vampire academy was certainly getting a full measure of our blood, sweat and tears and at no additional cost, for our labour was gifted in that we undertook these duties on top of our regular teaching, supervision and administrative workloads; in effect ‘large amounts of unpaid overtime’. Similar to Redden’s contentions in his analysis of the impact of the RAE, the ERA ‘took massive amounts of academics’ time to administer. Time used for micromanagement and review was itself non-productive and could have been spent on research’ (Redden, 2008: n.p.). Similar sentiments were expressed by a champion colleague in email correspondence with Faculty management during the review of ERA 2010 and its financial imposte on the Faculty. He noted that such work had not been properly costed and that the academic champions had undertaken their activities by finding minutes between lectures,

supervisory sessions, marking assignments, and committee meetings, as well as working overtime, and crucially, foregoing their own research, without any additional pay.

On reflection, I would like to believe as champions, we have been what Meyerson and Scully call ‘tempered radicals’, ‘individuals who identify with and are committed to the organization and also committed to a cause, community, ideology that is fundamentally different from and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of that organization’ (Meyerson & Scully, 1995:586). Although we recognized the need for the University to collate the research publications of all academics within the institution and the imperatives that future funding allocations would be based on the ability to show internationally significant research is being undertaken, at the same time we entertained a healthy cynicism that the exercise was yet another accounting system that does little to reflect the actual quality of our research nor the conditions of its production within our disciplinary fields. As tempered radicals we often faced a struggle to find the fit between our obligations to the University and our personal commitment to our individual scholarly endeavours. We walked a tight path between being identified by colleagues as collaborators with the evils of corporatism and audit culture and being identified by management as recalcitrant troublemakers.

Through the progress of the trial, in our dealings with research office management, we found we were able to temper what was initially a very instrumentalist and science based understanding of research productivity with at least a recognition that research activity in our fields are often non-traditional and hence difficult to quantify in their standardized mechanisms of citation indices and star journal rankings. And through our repeated complaints during the trial

that much of the non-traditional data we were compiling was disappearing from the ORD spreadsheets, we effected change to the University's reporting mechanisms. Although SCRIPT still requires some refinement, at least now there are appropriate tabs and headings under which non-traditional research can be cited.

Similarly, I like to think that through our agency we achieved a slight change in perspective within our disciplinary groupings. As a result of our personal interaction with colleagues during the ERA audits and our insistence on promoting the value of Humanities and Creative Arts research, some staff are now showing a shift from being reticent researchers with a compliance mentality to more proactive ones. Certainly in staff meetings and faculty forums, a number of our colleagues have become far more savvy in both identifying and arguing for the specificity of their own research activities. Whether our efforts have translated into a more profound cultural shift in the research understandings both within our disciplinary cohorts and the broader university environment remains to be seen.

By considering the activities of a small band of champions who were responsible for the collecting and collating research publications within the Faculty of Humanities during the ERA trial in 2009 and full assessment in 2010, in this paper I have highlighted the conditions faced by contemporary scholars. Our experiences of the impact of ERA have shown the increasing pressures placed on academics within the audit minded mentality of contemporary corporatized university culture. Not only have workloads increased as a result of the need for reporting on and justifying the various tasks undertaken in the academic year, but the individual sense of self worth through the contribution to a scholarly community is diminished.

Afterword

The ideas in this paper were originally presented in December 2010 at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia's annual conference, *A Scholarly Affair*. During the amendment of the paper for publication, the ERA 2010 results were published and the protocols for the ERA 2012 audit were finalized. After lobbying by disciplinary groups, scholars and interested parties, the ARC removed the ranking of journals as a mechanism for measuring quality. University research offices around the country have been analyzing the results of the ERA 2010 and strategizing for the next assessment round. At my University, the statistical analysis of the ERA 2010 seems to be providing a shift in the way the University's senior management views the research undertaken in the Faculty of Humanities, depending on who is putting the spin on the data. While I am hopeful that this positive view of the Faculty may result, eventually, in increased internal support and funding for research activities undertaken by scholars in the Humanities and Creative Arts cluster, I am also increasingly concerned about the impact of this next audit round upon them.

In gearing up for ERA 2012, it is evident that scholars across the country are being required to gift their time to yet another round of bureaucratic administration. At my institution, the champions have been involved in the review of the ERA 2010 and have provided comment on the strategic planning for the next round. Given their practical skills and corporate knowledge based on their experiences in the earlier audits, many, including myself, have been called upon to reprise these roles again for 2012. While there is a suggestion that this round will be more manageable because, this time, the data is already collected, I have my doubts that the task will

be any less onerous for the Humanities and Creative Arts cluster where evidentiary documentation and research statements for non-traditional research activities will still need to be collated and finely crafted. Given the rumoured imperatives in most universities in the country to either ‘bolster or bury’ research outputs to ensure a quality submission, the strategic implications for particular disciplinary groupings at a four digit level are of concern. As champions we are yet again caught between the desire to ensure our research fields are both acknowledged and protected, and at the same time, as members of the audit team we have to play the game ensuring that the University does not drop in their respective rankings in each reported FoR code.

In calculating the time between one audit and the next, time when staff are not required to attend to additional administrative workloads, time available for concentrating upon their own research endeavours, it is little more than twelve to eighteen months. Inevitably this will impact not only upon an academic’s productivity (the central pillar of contemporary corporate university culture) but also on their individual self worth as scholars who are able to make a significant contribution to knowledge both within their field and to the broader community. Unfortunately, the sentiment that ‘nobody will thank me for this’ may become the standard mantra in working life of the contemporary scholar.

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